



Outgoing Ambassador Helen La Lime Reflects on Time in Angola

Angola marked a return engagement for U.S. Ambassador Helen La Lime. She spent a portion of her youth in Angola, then returned for a three-year assignment to conclude a long career as a diplomat in the U.S. Department of State.



La Lime's career largely focused on Africa, and included a previous

ambassadorship in Mozambique, and a position with the Department of Defense's Africa Command, which coordinates military relations with African countries. She also served in South Africa, Chad and Morocco, among other countries.

During one of her final days in Angola in December 2017, she discussed a wide variety of topics, including her search for ghosts, the development of anti-piracy policy and her impressions about the future of the U.S.-Angola relationship as her successor Ambassador Nina Fite steps in.

Question: You have an interesting history with Angola. You spent six years here as a child. How did that come about?

Answer: My father worked for Texaco. He was one of two Americans who staffed the Texaco office in Angola at the time.

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La Lime: Learning to read English in a single weekend

When we came here, we first lived in the town of Lobito. We must have lived there for a couple of years. Then we came up to Luanda. I was a student at Colégio São José de Cluny.

Right at the end before we left, I asked my parents if I could go to an English school for a bit, so I went to a small English school. And since I had had no experience in an English classroom, I taught myself how to read English one weekend.

Then after that, we were transferred out of Angola to my father's next assignment in the Dominican Republic.

Q: Was Portuguese was your first language?

A: We spoke English at home, so I wouldn't say Portuguese was my first language, but it was the first language I was educated in.

Q: Did you say you taught yourself how to read in a weekend?

A: Yes. My father brought home some comic books. One Saturday morning, I started to read them – and I understood them. I knew how to speak English and I knew how to read Portuguese. It was just a matter of reading English.

Q: That's impressive. What kind of comic books?

A: I can't remember. Maybe Superman.

Q: I understand you found your childhood house. Is that true?

A: I was looking for ghosts. I found the two houses we lived in in Lobito.

We lived in three houses in Luanda and I found one of them. I lived in the house where the current Nigerian ambassador lives. I had been there for a reception a couple of years ago and I remember thinking, "Is this it or not?" Senator Russ Feingold was with us and we were busy and we had to rush out to something else. I thought, "Well, I have to go back."

La Lime: Landing in Angola and setting an agenda

My daughter and I were over there for a reception recently. I talked to the ambassador about the fact that I had lived there. He said, “Take a look around.” We went around outside and I took pictures. Then the sky opened up and we were invited inside to get out of the rain. It was amazing, because the rooms looked exactly like I remembered them. Maybe not in the kitchen, but otherwise, it was exactly as I remembered.

Q: Did you find any other ghosts?

A: Yes. I was at the British ambassador’s having a drink and he said, “We have the visitors book from receptions from the period of 1954 to 1960-something. Do you want to see it?” I said, “Sure, let me look at it,” but I really didn’t expect anything.

I started going through the book and I found my parents’ signatures. I found the signatures of two British teachers that I knew from the short time I was at the English school. I found the signature of my best friend’s parents and my dad’s boss. I mean, they were all there, all these names from the people I remember from that time.

I have not had the opportunity to go back to a place where I was a child until this assignment. Other people probably go back to their childhood homes all the time, if they’re born and raised in the United States. I never had that chance.

Q: Changing topics, as ambassador, what were your top goals?

A: Angola is one of three strategic partners that the United States has on the continent of Africa. The others being South Africa and Nigeria. Initially, the strategic partnership with Angola got off to a fast start, but after that, it just didn’t seem to move.

In the period before I got here, former Secretary of State John Kerry had visited and former Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Linda Thomas-Greenfield came twice. They laid the groundwork for me to reinvigorate the strategic partnership.

After some delays, I got confirmed as ambassador in May 2014 and I headed out here imme-

La Lime: Working on political and social matters

diately. We came up with a plan. We decided the way to give meat to the strategic partnership was not to base everything on Washington's attention, but to create a series of eight local dialogues that would be the work we do every day.

For example, we had a dialogue on political and social issues. Angola was a member of the International Conference of the Great Lakes. Angola was becoming more active in terms in hosting the meeting and working on bringing stability to the region. We worked closely with Angola on Burundi, Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and later, as the situation in the Central African Republic became more unstable, the Central African Republic.

Q: Any other highlights?

A: For the economic dialogue, we did quite a bit of training in the area of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act.



Q: That's the system of trade preferences for African countries to export goods to the United States, right?

A: Exactly. We opened up a new commercial section in three years, so we started to give more direct support to the U.S. companies that were here, and to U.S. companies that were interested in doing business here. We took Angolans to the United States for trade fairs.

Q: Was that work focused on the oil sector?

A: No. Other sectors. Angola wanted to diversify its economy.

La Lime: Countries focus on energy and health sectors

For example, we took a team to the Big Iron Farm Show in Fargo, North Dakota.

Q: Any highlights from one of the other dialogues?

A: We had an energy dialogue and we were able to get Angolans qualified under Power Africa. Now we have a consultant working at the Angolan Ministry of Energy to help them.

We've always given the Ministry of Energy some technical assistance, in terms of their power grid and fee structures and that sort of thing: How do you develop an electricity system? How do you charge for the electricity? What types of systems should you have?

They also have three electrical grids. We did a study on connecting the grids.

Power Africa focuses on trying to get deals. In order to do deals, they have to set up bidding processes. We've been giving them advice. What they need now is a deal, an investor to come in and work in the power sector. They've had a couple who are interested in the area of solar power.

Q: Any other highlights?

A: For the health dialogue, we reinvigorated our malaria and HIV/AIDS programs. Leaders of both programs in Washington asked me to really engage in them to make them better performing. It was a tough sell. I think we've improved the performance, although I think there's still a lot of work to be done in those areas.

Q: Any others?

A: Another area we did a lot of work on was security, particularly maritime security. The whole military-to-military relationship over the course of the past three years has strengthened. Secretary of Defense James Mattis signed a memorandum of understanding with former Angolan Minister of Defense João Lourenço, who's now president. That agreement will lead to greater cooperation, hopefully in the area of maritime security and peacekeeping operations.

La Lime: Thwarting pirates requires joint efforts along coast

Q: When you say maritime security, are you referring to anti-piracy?

A: Yes. When I was at U.S. Africom, I started to appreciate that the command was involved in a big anti-piracy effort on the east coast of Africa and that there was an increasing piracy problem in the Gulf of Guinea.

The command was involved in training militaries in the Gulf of Guinea region. But if you're going to go after a pirate, you need to be able to chase and apprehend that pirate when he leaves Nigerian waters and goes into Cameroonian waters or comes down to Angolan waters. All countries have to have legal systems that are harmonized and that provide for the capture, arrest and prosecution of those guys.

The command was interested in getting Angola more involved in leading maritime security efforts and hosting a maritime security conference.

I thought the only way to have a conference here was if Angolan President José Eduardo dos Santos gives the go-ahead. During my first meeting with the president, I asked him, "Do you have any objections with us partnering with you and organizing a maritime security conference?" He said, "No problem. Let's have the partnership be the United States, Italy and Angola." So we had the conference and came up with something called the Luanda Declaration, and Angola became more active in the maritime security arena.

Q: So far, that's five – the political and social dialogue, plus the economic, energy, health, and security dialogues. What are the others?

A: Agriculture, education and consular.

Q: What are the United States' interests in those areas?

A: There are many. For instance, the maritime security effort has to do with safety and combating terrorism. That's absolutely key.

In the fight against HIV and malaria, our own self interests are at stake.

La Lime: U.S. benefits with Angola's and Africa's development

The fewer diseases, or the more we can control diseases in the world, the more we protect ourselves. Also, HIV is devastating for Africa and it impedes Africa's economic growth. I mean, at one point, before we started this program, teachers in this continent were dying in incredible numbers. Doctors, too. If you decimate a whole generation of people, what does that mean for a continent's development, stability and security?

The economic work that we do is to promote a level playing field for U.S. businesses.

It's all about advancing U.S. interests in partnership with a country, and together working for the prosperity of our respective nations.



Q: Changing topics again, how is Angola different from other African countries where you've served?

A: The civil war here was longer than civil wars in other countries. It was a tough war. Many Angolans who had lived here left. Many went to Portugal, others to France, several to Germany. Now they've made the decision to come back to Angola because they want to be part of rebuilding this country. That, to me, is remarkable. I haven't experienced that quite to this degree in other countries.

Also oil. The amount of wealth the oil sector provided, I've never had exposure to that. It was huge. And then what happens to a country when the price of oil falls.

La Lime: Angolan President Lourenço is setting standards

Q: What's the outlook for Angola now?

A: It's very optimistic. There has been an election and Angola has a new president in power. There is euphoria in the country right now because of the reform effort that President João Lourenço has launched.

He has some very difficult problems to tackle, but he's surrounding himself with competent people, and he's putting competent people in charge of ministries and the Central Bank. He's setting standards. He's tough on corruption. We've seen that during the past several weeks with the number of people he's dismissed. People are being held accountable.

His approach is a consultative one. He listens. I don't think he was on the job a month when he called in the oil companies and established a task force that has the oil companies working with the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank. His interest is in improving the business climate.

Q: Of course, you've had the opportunity to meet President Lourenço. What is he like on a personal level?

A: He's never refused me a meeting. During the whole three years that I was here, he always accepted our meetings, so that was impressive.

Then when he went to the United States, I had the chance to observe him closely. He listens. He's calm. He's thoughtful. He doesn't get flustered. When something goes wrong with the schedule, for example a meeting has to be cancelled, he's cool. He's really impressive in that regard.

Q: Can you cite any particular examples?

A: Sure. One time we went into a meeting with the Atlantic Council and he asked me how he should approach that audience. I offered him some guidance: "No notes. Speak extemporaneously."

La Lime: Alliance is poised for new U.S. ambassador to step in

neously. Talk five to seven minutes, then take questions.” He did exactly that. He anticipated every question. He was amazing. People were really impressed.

Q: In addition to the recent change of administrations in Angola, there was a recent change of administrations in the United States. How do you think that will affect relations among the countries?

A: It’s a new opportunity to build stronger relations. The fact that there’re new administrations in both our countries – at this time in particular – presents a real opportunity to extend a hand to each other and to develop cooperation as partners.



It’s a very exciting time to be in Angola. I’m sorry that I couldn’t be here another year, but we’ll have a good successor. Nina Fite will take this forward and I will be watching from the United States.

Q: What are your plans for the future?

A: I’ll have to look for something else to do, that’s for sure. I’ve already started the process. I hope to find something that will continue to have me involved in Africa in some way.

Ambassador Nina Fite to take helm of Embassy Luanda

The President nominated Nina Fite, a career member of the Foreign Service known for her expertise in trade and economic-development matters, to serve as the next U.S. ambassador to Angola. The president announced his selection on Sept. 2, 2017, and Fite will begin her assignment in mid-January .

Fite previously served in numerous high-profile diplomatic positions around the world, most recently as consul general in Montreal, Canada, from 2014 to 2017, and in the same position in Lahore, Pakistan, from 2011 to 2014.

Importantly, she also previously served in Luanda as the Political/Economic Section chief. Her assignments also include stops in Kabul, Afghanistan; Budapest, Hungary; Lisbon, Portugal; Kingston, Jamaica; and Washington, D.C.

Her work also has involved environmental issues. For example, while on assignment with the U.S. Trade Representative's Office, Fite negotiated the environmental chapters of the Dominican accession to the Central American-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement and the U.S.-Panamanian Free Trade Agreement. She also has worked in the State Department's Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science.

Fite completed a master degrees in national resource strategy at the National Defense University in Washington, a master's in international management at the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Phoenix, Arizona, and a bachelor's degree of architecture at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



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Our American Citizen Services hours are 14:00 to 16:30, Mondays through Thursdays.

For notaries and non-emergency passport services, please make an appointment at: <https://ao.usembassy.gov/>.

Smart travelers are reachable during emergencies

The **Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP)** allows Americans to register with the U.S. Embassy when they travel overseas. The program provides embassy officers the means to contact travelers in times of need for travelers' families back in the United States, or during emergencies overseas.

Embassy officers ask travelers to keep their information updated, because it may be the only way to reach them during critical times. Travelers can enroll and edit their information online at <https://step.state.gov/step/> or come to the U.S. embassy during regular American Citizen Services hours.

Embassy closure dates

Jan. 15	Martin Luther King Day
Feb. 5	Armed Struggle Day
Feb. 13	Carnival
Feb. 19	Washington's Birthday
March 8	Women's Day
March 30	Good Friday
April 4	Peace Day

Do you have an idea?

This newsletter is for American citizens in Angola. What topics would you like to know more about? How can we make this forum as useful as possible? Please send your comments and suggestions to: ACSLuanda@state.gov.